

Word-of-Mouth: Positive and Negative Experiences with Hedonic and Utilitarian Products

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that a positive experience with a hedonic (vs. utilitarian) product leads to more word-of-mouth (WOM), whereas a negative experience with a utilitarian (vs. hedonic) product produces more WOM (Chitturi et al., 2008). Across three studies, we replicate this important finding and extend the mediational account for the effects. That is, with positive experiences, hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products produce greater attitude certainty which leads to heightened likelihood of intended WOM, while negative experiences with utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products produce less subjective ambivalence which leads to greater WOM intentions. Together, this research replicates prior findings and provides an explanation for its occurrence through a connection to the considerable research on attitude strength.

Introduction

More and more, companies are trying to initiate viral marketing campaigns: rather than employing traditional advertising, they rely on the consumers themselves to advocate the product or experience (Dye, 2000). In fact, word-of-mouth (WOM; i.e., the advocacy and/or discussion of goods and services between individuals not affiliated with the company; Dichter, 1967) is one of the most impactful forms of marketing today, estimates claiming that WOM drives 20-50% of

all purchasing decisions (Bughin, Doogan, & Vetik, 2010) and serves as one of the best predictors of top-line growth (Mardsen, Samson, & Upton, 2005). Although much of WOM's success comes from the prevalence and frequency for which we engage in it (Keller, 2007; Keller & Fay, 2012), a large part of its impact comes from the trust associated with it. That is, consumers believe a friends' opinions are less biased than the company's, and thus use them more to determine their own purchasing decisions (Godes & Mayzlin, 2004; Hautz, Füller, Hutter, & Thürridl, 2014).

Still, for as ubiquitous and consequential as WOM is, its antecedents remain relatively understudied (Berger, 2014). That is, although we know a lot about when and why WOM will be persuasive, we do not have an empirical grasp about when and why people will engage in it in the first place. One of the more fundamental papers examining this comes from C) who examined both positive and negative WOM in regards to hedonic and utilitarian products. Hedonic products are those that elicit aesthetic, experiential, or enjoyment-related benefits (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982; Dhar & Wertenbroch, 2000), while utilitarian products are those that possess functional, instrumental, and/or practical benefits (Adaval, 2001; Klein & Melnyk, 2014). In the work by Chitturi and colleagues, they show that positive experiences with hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products result in greater WOM intentions, whereas negative experiences with utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products produce more word-of-mouth. The researchers explain these interactive effects through the goals a consumer associates with each product, and subsequently, the emotions (i.e., promotion vs. prevention; Higgins, 2001) that result from the specific experience. That is, positive experiences with hedonic products result in greater "delight," while negative experiences with utilitarian products result in greater "dissatisfaction" (Chitturi et al., 2008). Individually, these emotions align with the consumers' initial goals behind the purchase

(i.e., promotion goals and delight; prevention goals and satisfaction), and this resulting “match” elicits the differential WOM effects.

The aim of this research project was first to replicate these important findings, but also, to extend the mediational explanation to more proximal, psychological variables. That is, rather than relying solely on promotion/prevention emotions to explain why people engage in positive and negative WOM, this paper strives to provide an account more in line with consumers’ own naïve experiences and reasons for spreading word-of-mouth. Such an explanation will not only provide more theoretical insight into when and why people engage in WOM, but it will also provide marketers with variables that can be more easily influenced to encourage positive WOM and reduce negative WOM. To accomplish this, we turn to the vast literature on attitude strength.

WOM through Certainty and Subjective Ambivalence

Attitudes are the evaluation of an object stored in memory (Briñol & Petty, 2012) and are particularly relevant to consumer researchers, because attitudes about the product are what companies aim to influence (Teeny, Briñol, & Petty, 2015). Research over the last century has categorized attitudes along a continuum from those which are weak and have little effect on behavior, to those that are quite strong and influence it considerably (Raden, 1985). Thus, “attitude strength” has come to describe the quality of attitudes which tend to persist over time, resist persuasion, and guide behavior (Petty & Krosnick, 1995). Attitude strength, however, is a multi-faceted construct that comprises a variety of strength-related attributes. For instance, attitude certainty (the metacognitive assessment of one’s confidence in the attitude; Gross, Holtz, & Miller, 1995) and subjective ambivalence (the extent of discomfort one has with conflicting evaluations about the same object; Thompson, Zanna, & Griffin, 1995) help to determine the strength of one’s attitude.

In regards to WOM, people can vary in the amount of certainty they have about their attitude toward the product (Gross et al., 1995), and the more certain one is, the more likely s/he is to engage in behaviors related to it (Rucker, Tormala, Petty & Briñol, 2014; Tormala & Rucker, 2007). In fact, some prior work has already demonstrated that the greater one's attitude certainty toward a topic or product, the more likely they are to engage in advocacy or WOM on its behalf (Cheatham & Tormala, 2015; Akhtar, Paunesku, & Tormala, 2013; Park et al., 2010). The antecedents to certainty include such things as social consensus (Petrocelli, Tormala, & Rucker, 2007) and attitude repetition (Tormala & Rucker, 2007); however, in particular regards to WOM likelihood, positive emotions have also been demonstrated to have a substantive effect on one's certainty (Tiedens & Linton, 2001; Huntsinger, 2013).

Research shows emotions with a positive valence (e.g., happiness, contentment, delight) tend to make us more certain of the relevant attitude, whereas negatively valenced emotions (e.g., anger, fear, disgust) tend to invalidate them (Briñol, Petty, & Barden, 2007). With the positive (vs. negative) experience of a consumer product, then, we should expect greater certainty of one's evaluation. However, when it comes to hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products within a positive experience, the former should result in greater validation of the attitude, because of the positive emotions that hedonic (vs. utilitarian) products already elicit. That is, this match between the positive emotions from the product type (hedonic) and the positive emotions of the experience (positive) should cause people to feel more certain about their attitude (Cesario, Grant, & Higgins, 2006). As such, these consumers should report relatively greater WOM intentions. When it comes to negative experiences, however, another attitude strength facet, subjective ambivalence, likely plays a role.

Most of the time when we purchase a product, we do so with the expectation that it will have desirable outcomes. That is, rarely (if ever) do we purchase something with the intention for it to disappoint us. As such, after buying a product and coming to find it doesn't perform as we wished, this "expectancy violation" results in subjective ambivalence (Durso, Hinsenkamp, and Petty, 2016). Unlike attitude certainty, though, high levels of subjective ambivalence typically reduce the likelihood we will act consistently with our attitude (whereas low levels of subjective ambivalence increases it; e.g., Armitage & Conner, 2000). In regards to negative consumer experiences, both hedonic and utilitarian products should generate some extent of subjective ambivalence; however, utilitarian products should produce *less* subjective ambivalence, which will result in *more* negative WOM. That is, because utilitarian objects typically have a singular, "objective" purpose (Adaval, 2001), when they fail to meet that expectation, people are less ambivalent about their overall reaction to the product. With hedonic objects, though, expectations for its performance are more broadly or "subjectively" based (Hirschman & Holbrook, 1982), and a violation here may result in greater ambivalence. Therefore, because people will be less ambivalent about their negative experience with utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products, they will be more likely to engage in negative WOM about it.

This paper presents three studies that aim to demonstrate the relative impact of attitude certainty and subjective ambivalence on people's intention to engage in positive and negative WOM for hedonic and utilitarian products. With the first study, it simultaneously examines the product experience (i.e., positive vs. negative) and the product type (i.e., hedonic vs. utilitarian) on attitude strength variables and WOM intentions. In the subsequent two studies, we look exclusively at positive (Study 2) and negative (Study 3) experiences with a consumer product, and present sequential mediational processes for the specific product type to promotion or

prevention emotions to the corresponding attitude strength variables. Together, these studies should complement prior work on this topic as well extend it to provide a fuller grasp on when and why people engage in word-of-mouth.

Study 1

Methods

A total of 131 undergraduate students (female = 88) were randomly assigned to one of four conditions in a 2 (product experience: positive vs. negative) x 2 (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) between-subjects design.

Participants were seated at a partitioned computer station where they were prompted to recall a pair of pants they had once purchased.¹ Specifically, the prompt instructed them to recall a pair of pants that was either “fun and pleasurable” (i.e., hedonic) or “practical and effective” (i.e., utilitarian). Additionally, the prompt directed participants to recall a pair of pants that, when owned, resulted in a positive or negative experience with them. After bringing to mind this specific type and experience with a pair of pants, participants were asked to briefly describe it in a box below the prompt.

Following this manipulation, participants responded with their attitude toward the pants (seven-point scale anchored at “Very negative” to “Very positive”), and then subsequently, their word-of-mouth likelihood regarding the article of clothing. For those in the positive experience condition, they answered: “How likely would you be to recommend this pair of pants to a friend?” (seven-point scale anchored at “Very unlikely” to “Very likely”), while those in the

¹ Using clothing as our attitude object (an ambiguous product which can be classified as hedonic or utilitarian), we were able to eliminate many confounds that arise from using disparate attitude objects. In which case, we were able to ensure greater internal validity in determining the effect of the product’s type (i.e., hedonism vs. utilitarianism) on word-of-mouth likelihood as well as attitudinal properties.

negative experience condition answered: “How likely would you be to warn a friend against buying this pair of pants?” (seven-point scale anchored at “Very unlikely” to “Very likely”). Afterward, participants reported their attitude certainty toward their pants by answering the three following questions: “How certain are you of your overall attitude (i.e., your general positivity or negativity) toward your pants?” “How sure are you of your attitude toward your pants?” “How confident are you of your attitude toward your pants?” (seven-point scales anchored at “Very uncertain/unsure/unconfident” to “Very certain/sure/confident”). As well, participants also reported their subjective ambivalence toward their pair of pants, measured with the three following questions: “How mixed are your feelings toward your pants?” “Regarding your pants, to what degree are you undecided on your opinion of it?” “How conflicted are you in your feelings toward your pants?” (seven-point scales anchored at “Not at all mixed/undecided/conflicted to “Very mixed/undecided/conflicted”).

At the end of the survey, participants completed measures of manipulation checks, assessing the extent to which their recalled pair of pants was hedonic (“Regardless of its actual performance, how hedonic (i.e., pleasurable, fun) do you think your pants’ features were intended to be?;” seven-point scales anchored at “Not at all hedonic” to “Very hedonic”) as well as utilitarian (“Regardless of its actual performance, how utilitarian (i.e., helpful, practical) do you think your pants’ features were intended to be?” two seven-point scales anchored at “Not at all utilitarian” to “Very utilitarian”). Together, these measures were used to create a difference score to determine the relative hedonic or utilitarian nature of the clothing.

Concluding the study, participants completed a brief survey about their demographics before they were debriefed and excused from the study.

Results

First, to determine whether participants were recalling products in line with their condition, the responses to the two manipulation checks were z-scored and subtracted from one another such that higher scores indicate an article of clothing is relatively more hedonic, while lower scores indicate it is more utilitarian. Entering product type (hedonic vs. utilitarian) and product experience (positive vs. negative) into an ANOVA as predictors for the manipulation check, only a main effect for product type emerged. That is, those recalling hedonic pants reported them to be more hedonic ($M = .22$; $SD = 1.22$), and those recalling utilitarian pants reported them to be more utilitarian ($M = -.22$; $SD = 1.27$), $F(1,129) = 3.96$, $p < .049$.

Turning to the primary DV of this research, we replicate the prior work (Chitturi et al., 2008) by finding a significant interaction between the product type and experience on WOM intentions, $F(1,129) = 7.17$, $p < .008$. Breaking down this interaction, for participants recalling a positive experience, those in the hedonic condition ($M = 6.29$; $SD = .78$) reported a greater likelihood of engaging in WOM than those in the utilitarian condition ($M = 5.71$; $SD = 1.29$), $F(1,129) = 4.75$, $p < .033$. And for those in the negative experience condition, those recalling utilitarian clothes ($M = 4.84$, $SD = 1.27$) report marginally greater WOM intentions than those recalling hedonic ones ($M = 4.33$, $SD = 1.27$), $F(1,129) = 3.11$, $p < .08$.

To determine whether these conditions were having their hypothesized effects on the proposed attitude strength mediators, we divided the data into its experiential halves (i.e., positive vs. negative) and submitted them to independent sample t-tests. Looking at attitude certainty in the positive condition, those recalling a hedonic product ($M = 6.34$; $SD = .74$) report greater attitude certainty than those recalling utilitarian clothes ($M = 5.87$; $SD = .98$), $F(1, 129) = 2.02$, $p < .047$. And for subjective ambivalence, those in the negative condition recalling utilitarian

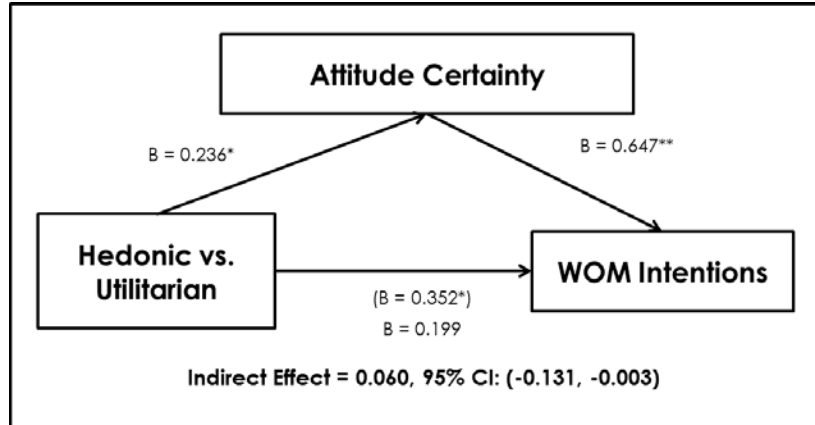
clothes ($M = 2.75$; $SD = 1.41$) reported less subjective ambivalence than those recalling hedonic clothes ($M = 3.58$; $SD = 1.55$), $F(1,129) = 2.12$, $p < .039$. When examining these attitude strength variables in their opposite condition (i.e., subjective ambivalence in the positive condition and attitude certainty in the negative conditions) no significant differences emerge.

Although these previously reported ANOVAs demonstrate the effect of product type within product experience, it remains to be seen whether these attitude strength variables mediate the relationship between product type and WOM intentions. To determine this, the data were submitted to tests of mediation using the PROCESS add-on for SPSS (Hayes, 2013).

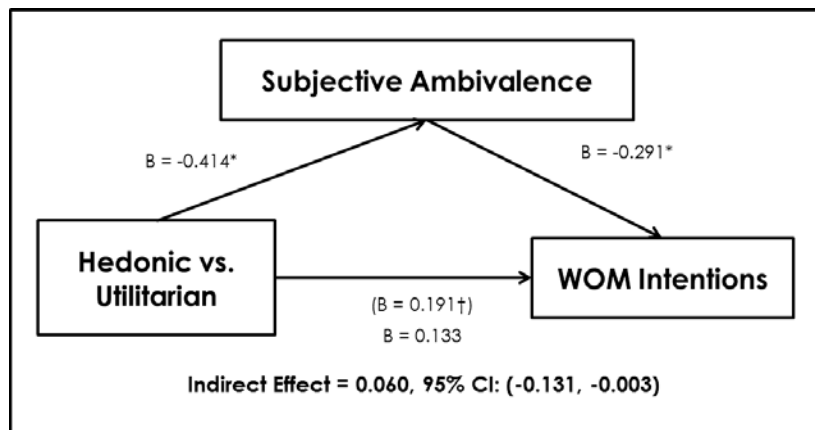
First, we tested the model for positive experiences, wherein the manipulated product type served as the predictor variable, attitude certainty as the mediator, and WOM intentions as the outcome variable. In this full regression model (see Figure 1), attitude certainty emerges to uniquely predict WOM intentions, $B = .65$, $t(64) = 4.53$, $p < .0001$, while the effect of product type drops from significance, $B = .20$, $t(64) = 1.55$, $p < .126$. Furthermore, this indirect effect of product type through attitude certainty, tested with a bootstrapping method of 10,000 iterations was statistically significant, $B = .15$, $SE = .08$, 95% confidence interval: [.02, .35].

Next, we tested the model for negative experience with the manipulated product type as the predictor variable, subjective ambivalence as the mediator, and WOM intentions as the outcome variable. In this full regression model (see Figure 2), subjective ambivalence emerged to uniquely predict WOM intentions, $B = -.29$, $t(64) = -2.55$, $p < .013$, while the effect of product type drops from significance, $B = .17$, $t(64) = 1.16$, $p < .250$. Furthermore, this indirect effect of product type through attitude certainty, tested with a bootstrapping method of 10,000 iterations was statistically significant, $B = .06$, $SE = .08$, 95% confidence interval: [-.13, -.01].

(Figure 1)



(Figure 2)



Study 2

Whereas the prior study examined both positive and negative experiences in the same experiment, this one considered only positive experiences with clothing. That is, this study employed a simple 2 cell design (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian) for positive consumer experiences.

Although similar in design to the prior procedure, these 203 participants were recruited from Amazon's Mechanical Turk website ($M_{age} = 31.7$; female = 92). For this study, participants were instructed to recall a jacket they had once owned that was either hedonic in nature

(described as “very delightful and enjoyable to wear”) or utilitarian (described as “very practical and useful to wear”). After participants briefly described the jacket in mind in the space below the instructions, participants responded to the same attitude, word-of-mouth-likelihood, attitude certainty, and subjective ambivalence measures as the prior study. However, in order to test the sequential mediation model hypothesized from the prior work on WOM intentions (Chitturi et al., 2008), measures of promotion emotions were also taken. To do so, participants responded to three, seven-point bipolar measures (adapted from Chitturi et al., 2008) measuring their emotions toward the product: Bored to Excited; Sad to Delighted; Annoyed to Happy.

After completing all of these measures and a survey of their demographics, participants were debriefed and excused.

Results

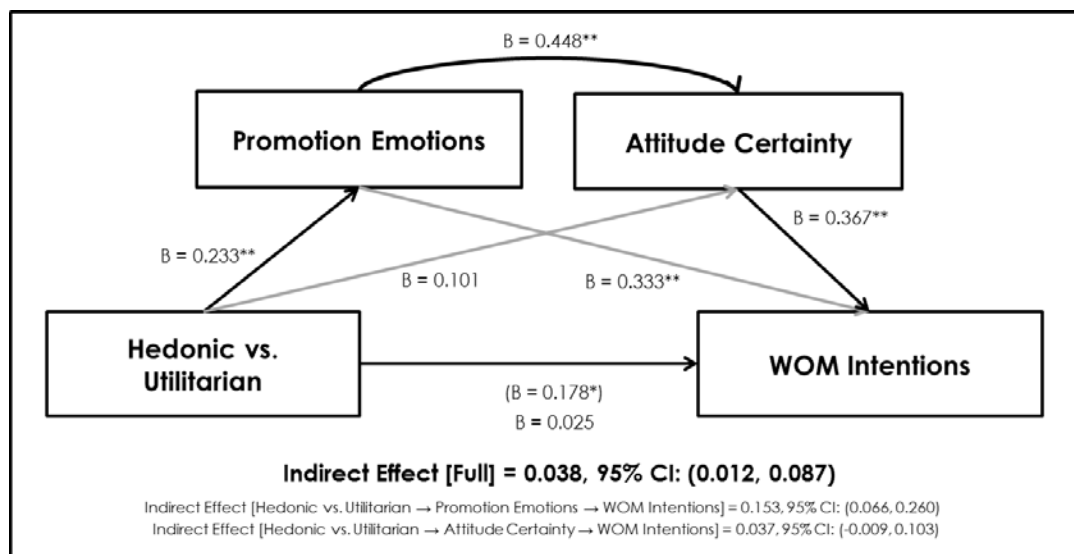
First, examining the manipulation check, participants in the hedonic recall condition reported their jacket to be relatively more hedonic ($M = .61$; $SD = 1.39$) than those in the utilitarian condition ($M = -.61$; $SD = 1.46$), $t(201) = 6.20$, $p < .0001$, where higher scores indicated a greater extent of perceived hedonic attributes.

Second, in replication of the prior study on word-of-mouth intentions, once again, positive experiences with a hedonic article of clothing elicit greater WOM intentions ($M = 5.97$; $SD = 1.04$) than utilitarian clothing ($M = 5.61$; $SE = 1.31$), $t(201) = 2.16$, $p < .032$. Furthermore, this pattern was also mirrored with attitude certainty, where a hedonic jacket ($M = 6.20$; $SD = .83$) produced greater attitudinal certainty than a utilitarian one ($M = 5.79$; $SD = 1.32$), $t(201) = 2.67$, $p < .008$. To examine the effect of condition on promotion-emotions, the three bipolar measures tapping into this construct were averaged to form a composite. And in line with prior research, those in the hedonic recall condition possessed more promotion-emotions associated

with the article of clothing ($M = 5.75$; $SD = 1.01$) compared to the utilitarian condition ($M = 5.28$; $SD = 1.10$), $t(201) = 3.13$, $p < .002$.

Finally, to test the hypothesized, sequential mediational pathway (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2013) product type, promotion emotions, and attitude certainty were entered in a model to predict WOM intentions. A summary of the pathways can be found in Figure 3; however, of crucial importance, the full, indirect effect path from product type to promotion emotions to attitude certainty on WOM intentions was significant, $B = .038$, $SE = .02$, $CI [.01, .08]$.

(Figure 3)



Study 3

Employing a nearly identical procedure to Study 2, participants recalled a negative (rather than positive) experience with an article of clothing they had once owned, using another 2-cell design (product type: hedonic vs. utilitarian).

Once again, participants were brought into the lab and instructed to recall an article of clothing. However, rather than restricting participants to a particular item, this time they were instructed to recall any type of clothing they had once owned and been disappointed by.

Specifically, though, the article of clothing they were prompted to recall was either described to be “useful” with “a functional purpose” (i.e. utilitarian) or “pleasurable” and meant for “an enjoyable experience” (i.e., hedonic). Afterward, participants responded to the same dependent measures as the prior study; however, to test the sequential mediation model for negative experiences (adapted from Chitturi et al., 2008) with prevention-emotions, participants responded to two, seven-point bipolar measures: Unsafe to Safe; Not secure to Secure.

Participants concluded the experiment by answering a series of demographics questions.

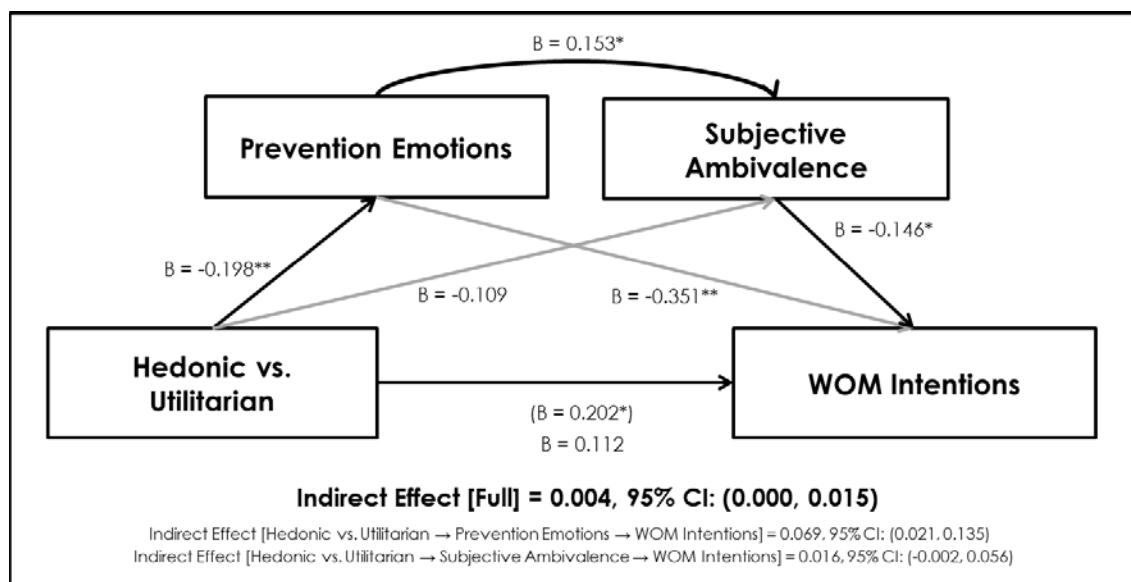
Results

First, examining the manipulation check, participants in the utilitarian recall condition reported their clothing to be relatively more utilitarian ($M = -.42$; $SD = 1.54$) than those in the hedonic condition ($M = .46$; $SD = 1.20$), $t(205) = 4.60$, $p < .0001$, where lower scores indicated a greater extent of perceived utilitarian attributes.

Second, in replication of the prior studies on word-of-mouth intentions, once again, negative experiences with a utilitarian article of clothing elicited greater WOM intentions ($M = 4.49$; $SD = 1.59$) than hedonic clothing ($M = 4.00$; $SD = 1.54$), $t(205) = 2.25$, $p < .025$. Furthermore, this pattern was also mirrored with subjective ambivalence, where utilitarian clothing elicited less ambivalence ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.55$) than hedonic clothing ($M = 3.71$; $SD = 1.62$), $t(205) = 3.40$, $p < .001$. To examine the effect of condition on prevention-emotions, the two bipolar measures tapping into this construct were averaged to form a composite. And in line with prior research, those in the utilitarian recall condition elicited more negative prevention emotions ($M = 4.59$; $SD = 1.13$) than those in the hedonic condition ($M = 4.21$; $SD = 1.28$), $t(205) = 2.21$, $p < .028$.

Finally, to test the hypothesized, sequential mediational pathway (PROCESS Model 6; Hayes, 2013) product type, prevention emotions, and subjective ambivalence were entered into the model to predict WOM intentions. A summary of the pathways can be found in Figure 4; however, of crucial importance, the full, indirect effect from product type through prevention emotions and subjective ambivalence onto WOM intentions was significant, $B = .004$, $SE = .003$, $CI [.00, .01]$.

(Figure 4)



Discussion

Across these studies, this research accomplished a number of goals. First, it replicated prior work (Chitturi et al., 2008) showing that positive (negative) experiences with hedonic (utilitarian) products leads to greater WOM intentions compared to the reverse. Furthermore, it extended the prior work to a new category of consumer products (clothing) and showed the effects with a recall task, rather than the fictional stimuli of the prior study. Additionally—and most novel from this research—we extended the mediational explanation for why these effects

occur, connecting that explanation to the vast literature on attitude strength. That is, in Studies 1 and 2, we showed the mediational effect of attitude certainty on WOM intentions for a positive (vs. negative) experience with a hedonic (vs. utilitarian) product. While on the other hand, in Studies 1 and 3, we showed the same mediational pattern for subjective ambivalence on WOM intentions for a negative (vs. positive) experience with a utilitarian (vs. hedonic) product. And from this extended process-account for the interactive effects of product experience and type, we allow for and help initiate both theoretical and applied developments to understanding when people will engage in word-of-mouth.

As Chitturi and colleagues described in their initial work, their mediators only partially explained the link between a product's attributes (i.e., hedonic or utilitarian) and why the participants engaged in WOM. These studies, however, expand that insight to the attitude strength domain. Attitude strength comprises a large body of research that has spanned many decades (Petty & Krosnick, 1995); thus, connecting it to WOM provides an opportunity to develop our understanding from a separate, foundational perspective. As discussed in the introduction, the extant knowledge on the antecedents of WOM is relatively lacking (Berger, 2014), so by demonstrating how attitude strength variables may play a role in whether someone intends to spread word-of-mouth, we can generate a myriad of new hypotheses from a well-founded position within the field. Furthermore, this research exhibits the unique predictive value of attitude strength variables depending on the context, helping to specify when we should expect other related (or distinct) attitude strength variables to predict WOM. Beyond word-of-mouth, though, these mediational findings also connect emotions to attitude certainty and subjective ambivalence in ways not previously documented.

Although attitude strength features like certainty have been linked to positive emotions (e.g., Briñol et al., 2007), for the first time we see their specific connection to positive, promotion-focused emotions versus positive, prevention-focused emotions. This finding, then, helps to specify antecedents to attitude certainty, and why attitude certainty may emerge in some contexts but not others. In regards to subjective ambivalence, its relationship to negative prevention emotions is also insightful. Typically, subjective ambivalence is captured by the affective discomfort that accompanies contrasting evaluations. Although this has been found for both positive and negative experiences, delineating the emotions associated with those experiences (i.e., prevention emotions) may help to explain when certain situations generate ambivalence and when they do not. However, beyond these theoretical contributions, this paper also provides real world applications of consumer behavior research, allowing marketers to more effectively promote word-of-mouth.

Companies hope that consumers will have positive experiences with their products, such that those same consumers will encourage others to make similar purchases. When it comes to marketing hedonic products, then, this research provides some direct insight on how to increase WOM; that is, by increasing the consumer's certainty. For example, research has shown that social consensus increases attitude certainty (Petrocelli et al., 2007); therefore, when marketing hedonic products, companies should use evidence of social consensus to bolster consumers' certainty about the positive experience. However, when it comes to utilitarian products, where people are more likely to spread negative WOM, here, it is the marketer's goal to *reduce* WOM. From this research, we know that increasing the amount of ambivalence associated with a product reduces the likelihood that someone will share about it. Thus, marketers should add peripheral, hedonic features to utilitarian products, so even if its primary function is not satisfied,

the unaffected hedonic features should result in greater ambivalence and subsequently less negative word-of-mouth. For example, marketing hiking boots (a utilitarian product) as stylish (a hedonic quality) will result in greater ambivalence should the boots not satisfactorily serve their utilitarian purpose.

In sum, this research both replicates and extends prior work on understanding the antecedents to word-of-mouth. Again, the current empirical understanding for when people will engage in WOM is lacking, so projects such as this one and others are important from both theoretical and applied perspectives. For future research, social scientists should consider the role of other attitude strength variables (e.g., knowledge, importance, etc.) in determining when people will engage in WOM. For example, maybe those with high knowledge about the product, will report greater WOM intentions for positive experiences with utilitarian (vs. hedonic) products, because they consider themselves an expert on the topic. However, for negative experiences, maybe more important attitudes would result in greater WOM likelihood for a hedonic compared to utilitarian product, considering that hedonic products are typically regarded as more important. However, these are just a couple simple questions from a wealth of others trying to understand when and why people engage in word-of-mouth.

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